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ABSTRACT

This digest explores the phenomenon of unschooled migrant youth in U.S. communities and schools and describes the responses of schools and programs to their needs. Older youth (aged 12-21) who enter the U.S. school system with little prior educational experience often are non-English-speaking immigrants who are illiterate in their own language. As their parents migrate to seek temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing, these youth suffer continuing disruptions to their schooling. Unschooled migrant youth are a rarity, and many middle and high schools are unprepared to provide special assistance. Such youth and their families need basic information and help in dealing with a myriad of alien experiences in school and community, as well as needing English and literacy instruction. Some program models that have proved helpful to unschooled migrant youth are (1) the transitional model, focusing on support services and basic literacy for newcomers; (2) the supplementary model, providing tutoring support for in-school youth and ESL evening classes for working youth; (3) alternative models, providing adult basic education, vocational ESL, and job training; and (4) advocacy programs. Successful school-based strategies focus on school climate and cultural respect, timely scheduling of crucial skills and classes, and literacy and language instruction. Effective classroom strategies emphasize multiple modes of learning, cooperative learning groups, constructivist learning techniques, and students' previous learning and life experiences. Contains 12 references and program contact information. (SV)

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Unschooled Migrant Youth: Characteristics and Strategies to Serve Them

by Susan C. Morse

THIS Digest explores the phenomenon of the unschooled migrant youth in U.S. communities and schools. The Digest begins by describing the youth themselves and their first encounters with schools. It then explains how different programs and schools have responded to their needs.

Who Are Unschooled Migrant Youth?

The children of fishermen and farmworkers who move with their families to seek temporary or seasonal work in fishing and agriculture are considered migrant students under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (for more information about recent changes in federal law related to migrant education, see Wright, 1995). Older youth (aged 12-21) who enter the school system with little prior educational experience, often, are non-English-speaking immigrants who are illiterate in their own language. In this country they suffer continuing mobility and interruptions in their schooling—conditions that increase their chances of dropping out (State University of New York [SUNY], 1987).

Why are these youth unschooled? Some migrant youth are from cultures (e.g., Hmong) that have no written language and rely on oral tradition. Some may not have attended school because their homes were remote from schooling opportunities. Others missed schooling due to frequent moves caused by economic need or political turmoil (Prewitt Diaz, Trotter, & Rivera, 1989).

Impacts on Schools and Unschooled Youth

A shock to the system. Unschooled migrant youth represent a small percentage of the school population. Their rarity may contribute to the failure of the schools to prepare for them.

The organizational structure of many middle and high schools inhibits the ability of staff to arrange for special assistance. Students who need to work in small groups or tutorials or use technology aids are limited by the segmented schedules. Most classroom teachers are not trained to help integrate youth with special needs into their classes.

Life on Mars. Student access to schools is limited by structural factors such as school calendars, attendance rules, enrollment caps, and eligibility requirements for special programs. In addition, access can be limited by school staff, who discourage migrant students' efforts to enroll by telling them it is too late in the year to enroll, or they would be too far behind, or they will feel out of place (based on personal communications with migrant education staff, migrant parents, and students over a 20-year period).

When these youth do enter school, they find all aspects of the experience alien: cultural and socioeconomic clashes, language obstacles, bells, buying lunch tickets, finding bathrooms and lockers, and remembering schedules. Many U.S. high schools are larger than the hometowns of the unschooled youth (Mounts, 1986). After school, youth may return home to additional pressures to provide child care, supplement the family income, and serve as liaisons with the outside world.

When they first arrive, unschooled migrant youth and their families need basic information about foods, medicine, public agencies, transportation, traffic and other laws, and emergency services. They also need friendships in the community to reduce the isolation that often inhibits successful integration into our system. And they need English and literacy instruction.

Finding a Program Model That Fits

Communities are faced with addressing these multiple needs as best they can. Described next are some models and strategies that have proved helpful to unschooled migrant youth in several U.S. communities. Each description is followed by a source for more information.

Transitional model. The Madera Unified School District (California) has developed a program to identify needs of, and provide services for, unschooled limited-English-speaking students (migrants or immigrants) enrolling in the schools. The Newcomer Assessment Center is feasible due to the large numbers of unschooled students found in this agricultural community. It serves students (a) who have attended school for 2 years or less, or had sporadic attendance; (b) whose language proficiency level is non-English or limited-English; or (c) who have limited or no literacy skills in any language. There are separate centers for middle and high school students. Students are transitioned out of the programs within 9 months. Qualifying migrant students who arrive late due to the harvest schedule are admitted.

The program goals are (a) to familiarize youth with the school protocol, (b) to develop basic literacy in the home language or English or both, and (c) to transition students into the regular school with an individual learning plan (ILP). Developed by a team, an ILP helps (a) coordinate the involvement of parents and youth in assessing need, (b) design an appropriate program, and (c) employ all resources available for the unschooled youth. (Contact Kathy Lopes, Madera Unified School District, 1902 Howard Road, Madera, CA 93637.)

Supplementary model. The Migrant Education Program in Pennsylvania, which has emphasized services to secondary migrant youth, offers after-school tutorial support to unschooled youth who have enrolled in school, and literacy and ESL evening classes to youth who work. (Contact Fran Mannino Corse, Mifflin House, P.O. Box 1002, Millersville University, Millersville, PA 17551.)

Alternative models. Adult basic education programs throughout the United States serve older unschooled youth. They may offer literacy and other classes in the first

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language, as well as ESL and English language literacy. The Boces Geneseo Migrant Center provides evening literacy training in the migrant camps, combined with child care and social and health services. (Contact Bob Lynch, Boces Geneseo Migrant Center; telephone 800/245-5681.)

Migrant 402, Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and Department of Labor programs provide vocational ESL and job training. These all-day programs may include stipends for the participants.

Drawbacks to adult education programs include age limitations (some programs do not serve youth under 16) and the part-time nature of the programs. Many young students need the help of a structured school day, as well as extracurricular and social activities, to motivate them.

Migrant advocates. In California, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Georgia, and Florida, migrant advocates work closely with the student and family. An advocate may be credentialed or paraprofessional, or even a student or community volunteer. The advocate's job is to serve as liaison, monitor student progress and attendance, serve as a role model, and assist families with support services. (Contact Terry Porter, Oceanside [CA] Migrant Education; telephone 619/967-1322, ext. 513.)

School-Based Strategies

School climate and cultural respect. An inviting school atmosphere will reduce the initial culture shock of the unschooled student. Maps and well-marked directions using color coding, labels, and symbols help improve access. Bilingual staff, student ambassadors, and cultural consideration help new students feel included and respected at the school. Most students drop out due to their *feelings* about school, not because of grades or failures (Johnson, Levy, Morales, Morse, & Prokopp, 1986).

Scheduling. Two essential issues should guide scheduling: Students must be scheduled into classes that earn credit and classes that teach concepts and skills needed for graduation. Time is a crucial factor in scheduling migrant youth. Fewer than two percent of migrant students graduate after the age of 19 (Duerr, 1986).

Language instruction. The priority for an unschooled youth is literacy and language instruction. Teaching literacy in the first language is a strategy that can have immediate payoff. Literacy will immediately empower them to continue their own learning. Efforts to learn ESL and English literacy without the support of first-language literacy can be discouraging. All ESL classes should include a content-area focus, offer credit, and have clear exit criteria (Krashen, 1997).

First-language maintenance has a practical economic benefit to youth and is important to their emotional health. When parents cannot communicate their values and concerns to their children in their own language, they lose the ability to parent effectively. Youth then begin to operate without societal direction, which can lead to involvement in gangs and other delinquent behavior (Vigil, 1997).

Classroom Strategies

Teachers need staff development to learn effective educational strategies. To help unschooled youth, teachers should be trained in the following strategies:

- Provide activities that appeal to all modes of learning (art, music, verbal, mathematical, logic, inter/intrapersonal skills, physical). Even before they write, students can listen to tapes and look at magazines, make drawings of their experiences, and practice handwriting (Lazear, 1992).
- Have students work in cooperative learning groups providing opportunities to interact successfully with their peers (Kagan, 1992).
- Use constructivist strategies to develop thinking skills and the ability to access information. Constructivist learning techniques work well for nonschooled learners because the approach resembles their own experience of learning from life (Hasegawa, 1996).
- Teachers should draw upon students' previous learning and life experiences. In the Language Experience Approach, used successfully in Oregon and California, a teacher/tutor records the student's experience, then teaches literacy from that text (Hanson-Krening, 1982).

Summary

Unschooled youth are still unserved in most school systems. Many are never identified and never come to school. A few lucky ones receive some of the services and models reviewed here.

If unschooled migrant youth receive appropriate assistance, they can respond positively with dramatic progress. Although these students have special needs, they also bring special rewards by helping all students increase their understanding of the world beyond their own community. Schools that successfully serve unschooled youth have well-trained staff; nurture flexible, multicultural environments; and provide access to additional services and resources for students and families.

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